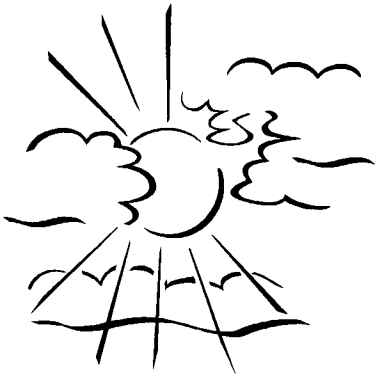


***Department  
of  
Human  
Services***

Prepared by the  
DHS Office of  
Communications  
(517) 373-7394



\*Important story at this spot

# **Articles in Today's Clips**

## **Tuesday, March 21, 2006**

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# Williamston couple paid to adopt boy they're accused of killing

3/21/2006, 5:30 a.m. ET

The Associated Press

WILLIAMSTON, Mich. (AP) — A couple accused of murdering their 7-year-old adopted son received about \$26,000 in state aid for adopting Ricky Holland and two of his siblings, state officials say.

Financial support for caring for Ricky ended when he disappeared in July, but Tim and Lisa Holland of Williamston adopted another of his siblings that month and began drawing about \$8,000 more per year, The Detroit News said Tuesday.

Subsidies went to the adoptive parents of 90 percent of the 2,844 Michigan children placed for adoption from state foster care in 2005. The payments range from about \$5,400 to about \$12,500 per child.

"Adoption subsidy really is an important tool for helping our children become adopted, especially children who have special needs, including handicapped children but also large sibling groups," said state Department of Human Services spokeswoman Karen Stock.

"Kids are expensive to raise, and certainly this adoption subsidy is helpful. But anyone who has had a family knows the costs go well beyond that," Stock said. "We don't want them to decide not to adopt because they would lose the foster care subsidy that allowed them to become a foster parent."

Some child welfare advocates say such incentives, along with federal bonuses paid to states to promote adoption of foster children, can put children in danger.

"In the Ricky Holland case, the problem is there are all these incentives to look the other way" despite abuse reports, said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform. "It wasn't the lack of warnings in the Holland case. It was the unwillingness to heed the warnings."

Tim and Lisa Holland reported Ricky missing July 2. They were arrested in January after Tim Holland led authorities to the child's body in rural Ingham County.

A preliminary examination is under way in Mason to decide whether to try the couple.

Subsidies for adoptive parents continue until a child turns 18. It continues until age 19 for those still in high school. Families also get help with adoption costs, medical bills and other expenses without regard to the adoptive parents' income.

To qualify for state subsidy, the parental rights must have been terminated for the child and the child must be under court jurisdiction. There also must be at least one additional factor, such as coming from an impoverished background, having special health needs or being part of a sibling group.

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Information from: The Detroit News, <http://www.detnews.com>

# **Parents get paid to adopt State gives subsidies; Ricky's family collected \$26,000 a year**

Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

The state paid the couple accused of murdering 7-year-old Ricky Holland about \$26,000 a year for adopting the boy and two of his siblings, state officials confirmed Monday.

And although financial support for Ricky ended when he went missing last July, the Hollands adopted another of his siblings the same month and began drawing nearly \$8,000 per year for him.

Financial incentives, commonly offered to parents to improve the odds of adoption of foster children, are facing criticism nationwide as a result of cases like Ricky's.

Child welfare advocates say those incentives, as well as federal bonuses paid to states to promote adoption of children in foster care, can put children in harm's way rather than with loving families. In addition to rewards, the federal government can penalize states that fail to adopt out kids by withholding child welfare funds.

Subsidies went to 90 percent of the 2,844 Michigan children placed in adoptive homes from state foster care in 2005. The payments range from about \$5,400 to nearly \$11,000 per year for a child younger than 13, depending on whether the child has special needs. For a child 13 or older, the range is \$6,665 to about \$12,500 per year.

"In the Ricky Holland case, the problem is there are all these incentives to look the other way" despite reports of abuse, said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. "It wasn't the lack of warnings in the Holland case; it was the unwillingness to heed the warnings."

Tim and Lisa Holland, who reported Ricky missing July 2, were arrested in late January, after Tim Holland led authorities to the child's body in rural Ingham County.

In another extreme case, a Grand Rapids couple accused of abusing some of their 13 adopted children received about \$100,000 per year in subsidies, according to Kent County officials. The couple, who denied hurting the children, agreed last week to give up the 12 youngsters who are still minors.

Subsidies for adoptive parents continue until a child turns 18, or 19 if the child is still in high school. Families also get help with adoption costs, medical bills and other expenses, regardless of the adoptive parents' income.

To qualify, the parental rights must have been terminated and the child must be under court jurisdiction. There also must be at least one additional factor from a list that includes conditions such as having come from an impoverished background, having special medical or mental health needs, or being part of a sibling group.

Subsidies are critical to keep moving foster children into families, state and federal officials say.

"Adoption subsidy really is an important tool for helping our children become adopted, especially children who have special needs, including handicapped children but also large sibling groups," said Karen Stock, spokeswoman for the state Department of Human Services.

"Kids are expensive to raise, and certainly this adoption subsidy is helpful. But anyone who has had a family knows the costs go well beyond that. We don't want them to decide not to adopt because they would lose the foster care subsidy that allowed them to become a foster parent." Adoptive parents, such as June Deboni of Shelby Township, say the horror stories set back the hopes of all adoptive parents.

Deboni and her husband, John, became parents to Jake, 4, through a private adoption. They receive no subsidies and covered their own adoption expenses.

"All the friends I know that adopted did it because they wanted to be parents, and they couldn't have children of their own," Deboni said. "There is a minority that seems to want to make an income off of it, and I don't understand why the social worker can't see that. (Those who adopt for the money) know how the system works, and they know how to get around it."

Parents aren't the only ones offered incentives to adopt children from foster care. A 1997 federal statute promises states money if they place a certain number of foster kids in permanent homes. And it fines them if they don't.

Those incentives can encourage adults to adopt children, and social workers to smooth the way, even if the arrangement isn't a good match.

"Some foster children desperately need to be adopted, (but federal policies) encourage quick and dirty slipshod placements, because there's no penalty if the adoption fails," Wexler said. "Child welfare systems almost never ask questions to which they don't want to know the answers."

Adoption subsidies come with no strings attached: Parents who receive the money are no longer watched by caseworkers or tracked any other way.

Testimony in the Holland case has revealed that state child protection workers had received complaints that Ricky was being abused, but did not remove him from the home. Child protection workers saw signs of abuse on Ricky's siblings on several occasions in the months after Ricky disappeared July 2. But they did not remove the other children.

The Hollands' attorneys say they weren't adopting for the cash.

"I don't believe money was the issue," said Tim Holland's attorney, Frank Reynolds. "Tim was and has been gainfully employed for a long, long time."

Lisa Holland's attorney, Mike Nichols, said the couple adopted because they believed they could not have children of their own. They took in Ricky and his three siblings before their biological child, Allison, 2, was born.

#### Failed adoptions not tracked

Since neither the states nor the federal government track the number of failed adoptions, no one knows how many adoptions out of foster care go sour.

Beryl and Jerome Richards of Grand Rapids were accused of abusing some of their 13 adopted children, who range in age from 7 to 17. The Richardses were not criminally charged, but nonetheless agreed last week to relinquish their parental rights.

At a court hearing last year to determine if the Richardses should lose their parental rights, the children testified that they were beaten with leather belts and an electrical extension cord, and not properly fed.

Kent County Assistant Prosecutor Vicki Seidl questions why the state Department of Human Services failed to recognize the potential for disaster after placing so many children, including several with special needs, with one adoptive family -- and paying them about \$100,000 a year.

"When I raised that issue with the head of the regional (Department of Human Services), they (said) ... it was an ideal situation," Seidl said. "Their rationale was (consistent with) policies. Policies always have good intentions, and the results sometimes aren't always what they want." States earn bonuses

State Department of Human Services officials say Michigan's child welfare policies are structured to meet federal demands. States that exceed a federally established goal number of adoptions can earn payments of \$4,000-\$8,000 for each child adopted beyond that goal.

Michigan was among the country's biggest beneficiaries of that provision, receiving \$6 million in payments for adoptions between 1998 and 2002. That year, the rule was changed so that states could get the bounty only if they exceeded the number of adoptions they had in 2002 -- 2,923 in Michigan's case.

Michigan's number of adoption has dipped just slightly since 2002 and has narrowly failed to qualify for the payments since then. Michigan placed 2,844 children in adoptive homes in 2005, missing the benchmark by just 79 adoptions.

"Michigan won't collect any federal bounties for adoption unless it exceeds the baseline," Wexler said, "so every additional adoption brings them closer to the goal of getting those incentive payments."

*You can reach Karen Bouffard at (734) 462-2206 or [kbouffard@detnews.com](mailto:kbouffard@detnews.com).*

### **Adoption incentives**

For children under 13: \$14.83 per day per child; \$15 per day extra if the child needs higher-than-average level of care.

For children 13 and older: \$18.26 per day; \$16 more for special-needs teens.

Reimbursement for therapy, tutoring, summer camps and other needs for kids with mental, emotional or physical needs.

\$2,000 to help cover adoption fees.

*Source: Michigan Department of Human Services*

# Couple charged in baby's death

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

By John Tunison  
The Grand Rapids Press

HOLLAND -- A Holland couple accused of murder after their 2-month-old baby died earlier this month told police she simply stopped breathing during a feeding.

The family's version of events in the moments before Cynthea Gonzales stopped breathing are part of a court affidavit filed in Hays County, Texas, by San Marcos police.

Police say the infant died from severe head trauma March 11 in San Marcos, eight days after the family moved there from Holland.

The parents, Cipriano Gonzales IV and Esther Marie Gonzales, both 23, were arraigned Monday in Holland District Court on fugitive charges, pending extradition to Texas on a capital murder warrant. Both have requested extradition hearings that likely will be scheduled for mid-April, giving the Michigan attorney general's office a chance to review the case.

Judge Brad Knoll denied bond and the couple remains in the Ottawa County Jail.

Cipriano and Esther Gonzales were in Holland to make funeral arrangements for their daughter when they were arrested Friday.

According to the affidavit, a synopsis of police interviews with members of the Gonzales family, Cipriano Gonzales IV was feeding the baby in an upstairs room when he told his wife he thought she needed to be burped. She then tried to burp the child.

"Esther could hear the baby was trying to burp, but nothing was coming out," according to her statement to detectives. "She looked at the baby and noticed that her eyes were rolling back in her head. She then observed the baby's lips were turning blue."

Police said Cipriano Gonzales' father, Cipriano Gonzales III, began CPR at the instruction of a 911 dispatcher.

The elder Gonzales told police he saw some blood and milk coming from the baby's nose, but that "air would not go into her."

The baby later died at Central Texas Medical Center, despite efforts of emergency workers who arrived at the Gonzales' home and continued CPR.

San Marcos police say the family's story does not add up.

"The stories don't match with the medical evidence," said Sgt. Penny Dunn.

The Travis County Medical Examiner's office determined the child suffered a fractured skull, two bruises under the scalp and had multiple rib fractures from a previous injury that were healing.

A second medical examiner, from Tarrant County, told police the infant likely died from the head injuries and that she would have "gone unconscious almost immediately after the injuries were inflicted," the affidavit said.

The examiner said the infant's injuries are commonly associated with intentional trauma. Police said Monday they're continuing to investigate the death.

"We don't know what the motive is," Dunn said. "All we know is what the parents have told us."

Dunn said the rib injuries may be telling evidence.

"It's obvious those injuries were well-healed beyond a week," she said.

San Marcos is located about 220 miles from the Mexican border.

On Monday, someone who answered the phone at the San Marcos home of Cipriano Gonzales III declined to comment.

# Prosecutor: Baby death not homicide

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

By John S. Hausman  
MUSKEGON CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

No massive infection.

No "penetrating blunt trauma" to the rectum.

And no infant homicide -- contrary to earlier reports of a horrible sex crime in the little Oceana County town of Shelby.

That's the startling result of the Kent County chief medical examiner's review of autopsy results for 5-month-old Sebastian James Gonzalez, who died Dec. 12 at Hackley Lakeshore Hospital after being found unresponsive in the home of his parents, Jaime Gonzalez and Samantha Trout. There is no evidence the baby was raped, or that he died as a result of septic shock, according to Dr. Stephen Cohle, a forensic pathologist.

The original, contrary conclusion by a Muskegon pathologist who did the autopsy on Sebastian, some 24 hours after the baby died, was erroneously based on decomposition that normally occurs over that period of time, Cohle concluded.

Partial results from the state police crime laboratory also give no support to the original belief that the baby's death was a homicide, said Oceana County Prosecutor Terry Shaw. No DNA or circumstantial evidence supports the homicide theory, he said.

"In my opinion, it's definitely not a crime," Shaw said this morning. "It's not a homicide, nor is there evidence at this time of any type of abuse.

"I am very glad to know that what appeared to be a very horrible crime has not been committed," Shaw said. "What we all thought was a crime, what made us sick, didn't happen."

At Shaw's request, Cohle reviewed the autopsy report, photographs, police reports and laboratory slides from the original autopsy. The original autopsy report concluded the baby died from septicemia -- a sudden, massive infection caused by "penetrating blunt trauma" to the infant's rectal area from a sexual assault.

"I do not believe that the autopsy findings support the opinion of rectal injury with subsequent sepsis (infection)," Cohle wrote in a one-page report faxed Monday to Shaw.

"Except for the diaper rash, I believe that most of the findings thought to represent rectal injury are postmortem changes," Cohle wrote.

Cohle's autopsy review does not state a likely cause of death.

Cohle this morning said he is unable to determine a cause or manner of death for the baby -- whether it was medical, homicide, accidental or whatever. "As a medical examiner, I would probably say the cause and manner are 'indeterminable,' " he said. "At least that says what isn't happening."

"A lot of work and effort's gone into this," Shaw said of the criminal investigation. "It's not unusual in the law enforcement business that what starts out as a credible criminal complaint comes out unfounded. That happens."

After the original autopsy report became public in January, law enforcement officials said their investigation was focusing on the baby's grandfather, a convicted sex offender who had been baby-sitting the infant.

Shaw said today that man is now cleared of suspicion in Sebastian's death. Shelby Police earlier said the baby's parents had been cleared of suspicion.

Still scheduled is an Oceana County Probate Court hearing April 5 regarding custody of the couple's older son, 2-year-old Jacob Gonzalez. The toddler was removed from his parents' custody after police began investigating Sebastian's death.

But that, too, is likely to change now.

"We're still going to have to review that to determine whether the child needs a court's protection and services, but it definitely will change the thrust of what we're going to do," Shaw said. "It will not go on the same track it has been."



Oakland County

NEWS IN A MINUTE: Oakland County

March 21, 2006

## **OAK PARK: Woman sues school officials in son's abuse case**

The mother of a boy thought to have been sexually assaulted by a teacher at Key Elementary School in Oak Park has filed a lawsuit against several school officials, claiming the district was negligent.

The woman filed the lawsuit March 14 against the Oak Park Board of Education, board President William Parker, Key Elementary Principal Brenda Snow, Superintendent Sandra Harris and James Norman Perry, who has been charged with sexually assaulting the woman's son and another boy last fall.

Both boys were 5.

The suit, which seeks more than \$25,000 in damages, claims that the district is liable for Perry's acts and says that he should have been properly investigated before being hired.

The lawsuit has been assigned to Oakland County Circuit Judge Deborah Tyner.

Perry has been charged with two counts of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and two counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct. He's due back in court in Pontiac for a preliminary examination hearing at 8:30 a.m. April 13.

*By Gina Damron*

# Teen sex offender to get therapy — Boy apologizes to girl he assaulted in library restroom

By Lisa Roose-Church  
DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

The 13-year-old Brighton boy who assaulted a 7-year-old girl at the Brighton library last year was described Monday as a predator whose impulses make him likely to sexually assault again.

"The problem is, while you are very sincere, we have not yet addressed what got you to this point of having to act out in this way," Juvenile Court Referee Kathleen M. Oemke told the teen. "You need help."

Oemke ordered the teen to undergo sex offender therapy, preferably in private programs in Iowa or Wyoming. She also ordered the boy to remain in state custody for two years and to spend 127 days in detention, although he receives credit for 97 days already served since the incident at the library.

During Monday's hearing, the 7-year-old victim — dressed in a plaid skirt, her hair in pigtails — sat quietly between her parents while a videotape was shown in which she described how the teen lured her into the bathroom, where he sexually assaulted her. When the tape ended, the little girl asked, "I was wondering if the boy could say he's sorry."

The teen consulted briefly with his attorney, then stood, turned to face the girl and said, "I really am sorry about what I did."

Because of their ages, the Daily Press & Argus is not identifying either child.

According to testimony, the teen approached the 7-year-old girl and her mother Dec. 13 and falsely identified himself as a volunteer at the library. The mother said the teen gained their trust so that when he approached her daughter a second time, her daughter did not see the teen as a stranger her parents warned her about.

The teen convinced the little girl that her mother said it was all right to come with him inside the bathroom. Once inside a stall, the teen assaulted the girl. He fled only when someone else entered the bathroom.

"Without that intervention, what would have happened?" Assistant Prosecutor Marilyn Bradford asked.

Bradford asked the court to consider the teen's past behavior, which includes "ongoing behavioral problems" since the first grade. She said the teen has exhibited "impulsive behavior" that escalated throughout the years and culminated in the attack on the 7-year-old girl.

"Past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior," Bradford said, noting there is concern that the teen will offend again if he is placed at home. "We will not, and are not, willing to take the risk."

The teen's attorney, Mitchell Perrault, asked the court to consider home placement with community-based services including sex offender treatment. Perrault said his client struggles with a mental ability three to five years behind his physical age of 13.

"No one realized he had that issue going on inside him," Perrault said, noting that his

client's behavior has improved since undergoing sex offender treatment.

Social worker Wendy Kunce agreed the teen would benefit from a combination of community-based services, such as sex offender-specific counseling and tether or electronic monitoring. She also noted that the teen has "made further admissions of culpability" regarding the sexual assault. She saw this as a positive step and believed his new admissions are a sign that he will be successful in treatment.

"I believe with a combination of services at the community level ... that (the teen) could be successfully managed," Kunce said.

The teen promised, "I will never do anything like this again," adding that if he is sexually curious again he will call his therapist, his attorney or someone who can help him deal with it.

"I'm gonna turn everything around. I'm not gonna do anything like this again," he said. Oemke said she believes the teen is "very sincere" but still required more intensive therapy and supervision.

The teen pleaded guilty in February to second-degree criminal sexual conduct and gross indecency.

In exchange for the teen's pleas, the Livingston County prosecuting attorney's office agreed to dismiss charges of first-degree criminal sexual conduct and accosting a child for immoral purposes.

"We don't look at (the teen) as some monster," the victim's father told the court. "We want nothing more than for him to get the help he needs.

"We really are praying you get the help you need," the father said, addressing the boy directly.

The Michigan State Police is investigating another girl's claim that the 13-year-old male also sexually assaulted her. Details on this incident have not been made public due to the ongoing investigation.

Following the December incident, the Brighton library board agreed to purchase surveillance cameras for the library.

Originally published March 21, 2006

# Governor Urges Legislature to Act on Anti-Bullying Legislation

March 21, 2006

LANSING – Governor Jennifer M. Granholm today urged legislators to pass bills introduced by Senator Buzz Thomas (D-Detroit) and Representative Glenn Anderson (D-Westland), creating a policy that would protect Michigan children from harassment or bullying at school. Governor Granholm called for tough, new, anti-bullying legislation in her 2006 State of the State address.

“Intimidation and fear have no place in our schools,” said Granholm. “To give our kids the world class education they need, we need to make sure all schools are safe.”

Research in the Journal of the American Medical Association suggests that one out of every three students in grades 6 through 10 have been involved in a bullying incident. While some school districts in Michigan have established strong anti-bullying policies to address the issue, these bills will ensure that policies are in place in every school across the state.

“Bullying and harassment in school can lead to violence and deprive students of access to educational opportunities,” Thomas said. “The Legislature demands that students go to school, and we should also demand that students are safe in school.”

House Bill 5616 and Senate Bill 1156 will require that school districts create and adopt policies that prohibit harassment or bullying at school and submit their policies to the Michigan Department of Education. To assist school districts in developing their policies, the Department of Education will develop a model policy applicable to grades K-12. House Bill 5616, sponsored by Representative Anderson, has received bipartisan support and 46 co-sponsors.

“Bullying is a very serious threat to school safety and has been linked to higher levels of dropout rates, crime, suicide, and school shootings,” said Representative Anderson.

“While strengthening curriculum is vital to a student’s success, children cannot learn in an atmosphere of fear. All Michigan children should benefit from the same level of safety regardless of where they attend school.”

The new tough, effective, anti-bullying policies will include teacher training programs, procedures for reporting acts of bullying, procedures for response when acts of bullying are identified, age-appropriate consequences for persons who violate the policies, and procedures for prompt investigation of reports of violations and complaints.

“Bullying is a pervasive but preventable aspect of adolescent behavior with deep and long-lasting consequences for both the victim and the perpetrator,” said state Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Flanagan. “Prevention can lead to many other positive school outcomes for students: staying in school, getting better grades, participating in class and after-school programs, and building opportunities for the future.”

When signed into law, House Bill 5616 and Senate Bill 1156 will be known as “Matt’s Safe School Law” in honor of Matt Epling, a student who took his own life in 2002 after a hazing incident at MacDonald Middle School in East Lansing.

# Teen spots 2-year-old wandering on street

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

BARRIE BARBER  
THE SAGINAW NEWS

Last week, Jameson T. Stamann retrieved a wayward dog.

Sunday, he found a lost child -- whom police eventually turned over to a state agency.

Stamann, 14, spotted a chilly 2-year-old girl wandering outside in pink pajamas with footies while he removed fliers announcing he had found the dog, which he returned to its master.

As he took down a handbill from a telephone pole near North Oakley in Saginaw, he spotted something out of the corner of his eye around 7 p.m.

"At first I thought I was seeing things, but I looked back over there and it was a little girl," he said.

He ran toward the toddler standing next to a body shop along North Bond and asked the crying infant to tell him her name.

"I knew she probably wouldn't be able to answer me," said Stamann, son of Kristie A. Stamann of Saginaw and Robert A. Hall of Bridgeport Township.

"I picked her up, I brought her over to my house, and I had my mom call the police."

The temperature outside was in the 30s, the teen said.

City police officers went door-to-door searching for the child's parents without success, he said.

The tot's mother contacted officers around 10:30 p.m. to report her missing, said Saginaw Police Lt. Paul S. Crane.

Police referred the matter to **Child Protective Services**, which Crane said took custody of the baby. Police are not planning a criminal probe, Detective Sgt. Mark Lively said today.

Barrie Barber is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach him at 776-9725.

**NORWALK, OHIO**

## **Parents in cage case lose custody**

A couple accused of forcing some of their 11 adopted children to sleep in cages were stripped of custody Monday, six months after a social worker found the enclosures.

Juvenile Judge Timothy Cardwell said there was a good chance Michael and Sharen Gravelle would mistreat the children again, citing a history of sexual abuse allegations against the father.

The couple have pleaded not guilty to several charges, including child endangerment, in a separate case.

# Fewer dentists accepting Medicaid

Anthony Martinez Beven  
*The Battle Creek Enquirer*

It's been a challenge for Calhoun County's low-income residents to find a dentist who will take their Medicaid insurance.

Now it's getting even tougher.

The number of Michigan dentists willing to accept Medicaid payments has fallen 39 percent in the past six years. That leaves only about 15 percent of the state's 6,500 dentists to take Medicaid, according to the Michigan Department of Community Health. In addition, some dentists who do participate in the program limit the number of Medicaid patients they will see.

Springfield resident and Medicaid recipient Amy Knowles said she has had a lot of dental problems the past couple of years. She recalled one instance where one of her wisdom teeth was coming in at an angle and cracked another tooth.

"I had to have it removed," the 27-year-old said. But finding a dentist to remove it wasn't easy. She said she visited several area dentist offices, all which did not take Medicaid.

If people don't get regular dental care, it can lead to tooth decay, gum disease or both, said Dr. Henry Brown, a Battle Creek dentist for nearly 50 years.

"If you went back in history, (gum disease) was a very common cause of death," he said. He added that today it still can be a life-threatening risk.

The Calhoun County Public Health Department does not track data on the number of dentists who accept Medicaid, according to spokeswoman Ginger Hentz. Last year, there were more than 16,500 people in the county enrolled in a Medicaid-qualified health plan. Brown said in the early 1970s when the state health department first proposed the Medicaid program, it had major infrastructure deficiencies.

Like many Michigan dentists, though, he chose to give it a try. He said he regrets the decision.

"Medicaid was a very poor program. It was worse than the (Veterans Affairs) program," he said. There were overwhelming amounts of paperwork that needed to be processed before a patient could be cleared to receive treatment, he said.

"This was a big program," Brown said. "We spent hours and hours working with this system."

On top of that, he said, most of the applications his office submitted on behalf of Medicaid patients were denied.

"We got about 100 percent rejects. Reject, reject, reject," Brown said.

Dr. Rebecca Sommer, another Battle Creek dentist, said she heard negative things about the Medicaid program from the start, so she decided not to take part in it.

"I have heard that the paperwork is outrageous and that the processing is slow," said Sommer, who has been practicing dentistry for 20 years.

She added she has been told the reimbursement level is so low that it doesn't cover the cost to administer services to patients.

Medicaid is funded by the state and federal governments and serves low-income

individuals as well as people with disabilities.

The state pays dentists \$14.89 for an examination, \$22.10 for a cleaning and \$48.45 for a complex filling.

Comparatively, Brown said, the average cost of an examination runs about \$60, while a cleaning can cost around \$58.

### **LIMITED OPTIONS**

The Calhoun County Nursing Clinic in Battle Creek did offer dental services for Medicaid patients but stopped the services a few years ago because few Medicaid patients were coming in for dental care, Hentz said.

Other dentistry options, though, became available for local Medicaid patients.

The Family Health Center in Battle Creek, a nonprofit organization funded by the federal and state governments, only sees uninsured and Medicaid patients with medical and dental problems, said president and chief executive officer A.J. Jones.

In 2004, the health center saw nearly 9,000 patients with dental concerns. The following year that number hit almost 14,000 patients.

"Dentists are not taking Medicaid because of the low reimbursement and the cumbersome paperwork," Jones said. "It is not surprising that they do not take Medicaid."

Knowles, who has been on and off Medicaid for eight years, said the health center is the only place that will accept her Medicaid health insurance plan.

She said even though dentists at the health center do a good job, "it's hard to get in."

Brown, who opted out of providing care to Medicaid recipients in the late 1970s, said recipients will be "pretty hard-pressed" to find a dentist who will treat them, especially considering the cost it takes to operate a dentist office today.

"The cost of overhead is horrendous, from rent on down to employees," he said. "You cannot operate at a loss."

T.J. Bucholz, spokesman for the state health department, said "Occasionally, we hear complaints about the difficulty dentists have, and when we hear those complaints, we try to address them as soon as possible."

Bucholz said the Medicaid program can be improved, but funding has been difficult to maintain.

Still, he said, "We absolutely need dentists to agree to participate in this program. It's a critical way to ensure Medicaid people have this benefit."

*The Associated Press contributed to this report. Anthony Martinez Beven covers health and features. He can be reached at 966-0684 or [abeven@battlecr.gannett.com](mailto:abeven@battlecr.gannett.com).*

Originally published March 21, 2006



# Medicare help

BY SALLY BARBER, CADILLAC NEWS

March 21, 2006

Seniors who have put off registering for Medicare Plan D will find personal help available at a special enrollment session hosted by U.S. Rep. Pete Hoekstra.

The sign-up session for the new federal prescription drug program is scheduled for 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday at Baker College in Cadillac.

Seniors without a prescription drug insurance plan are urged to attend.

"People are overwhelmed with the 40 choices," said Katherine Haley, a legislative aid for the congressman. "But once they sit down with someone and are walked through the process, they find it easy."

Along with members of Hoekstra's staff, representatives from the Social Security Administration, Michigan Medicare/Medicaid Assistance Program and local senior advocacy organizations will be present to provide assistance.

Wexford County Commission on Aging has already helped about 300 seniors register, according to COA staff member Susie Greenman. An unknown number are yet unregistered and are invited to participate in the session.

The session aims to help seniors meet the May 15 open enrollment deadline. Eligible seniors who fail to register by the deadline will be penalized 1 percent monthly until registration is completed. The penalty remains with their account permanently. The next open enrollment period is Nov. 15 through Dec. 31.

Computers and trained counselors will be available at Wednesday's enrollment session.

"We ask people to RSVP so we can be sure to have enough people on hand to help," Haley said.

People may RSVP to the congressman's Holland office at (616) 395-0030. Attendees will need to bring a list of their prescribed medications, their Social Security and Medicare ID numbers, any supplemental health insurance information and their Social Security Medicare letter if they received one in the mail.

Some seniors are eligible for additional assistance in the form of reduced premiums or cost sharing. A number of the qualifying citizens have mistakenly thought they were not eligible for the help. Haley urged seniors to double-check their qualifying status.

Those unable to attend the session at Baker College may obtain the same assistance by calling 1-800-MEDICARE.

“Wait time is generally 45 seconds and you can talk to a real person,” Haley said.

As of Feb. 11, 61 percent of beneficiaries in the state have prescription drug coverage, Haley said. The figure includes those registered in Medicare Plan D, those with private coverage equal to or better than Medicare Plan D, federal employees and military retirees.

[sbarber@cadillacnews.com](mailto:sbarber@cadillacnews.com) | 775-NEWS (6397)

March 21, 2006

A child is waiting

## **Jermia needs a supportive family**

Rosemary Dorr / Special to The Detroit News

He's only 11, but Jermia is rarin' to go to work. "I like to do jobs," he says. "I'm going to save up money for college." That's after he buys a PlayStation, he adds with a grin.

Jermia is friendly, outgoing and articulate. "He's smart, artistic and a natural at sports," says his therapist at the residence where Jermia has lived for 2 1/2 years. "He trains. Does pushups and runs."

Says Jermia, "I like running. I'm probably the fastest in my cottage."

A sixth-grader in special education classes, Jermia finds school "exciting." He says, "I like art best, especially drawing people. I also like math. I like listening to music (hip-hop and R&B), writing (he keeps a journal) and gymnastics (his back flip is unique)."

Also, says the talented youngster who wants to be a music producer, "I share, and I like people when they're funny."

Much in Jermia's life has been hurtful, though, and he worries about acceptance. "He's a really good kid who has so many strengths," notes his adoption worker. "He just needs a family." An understanding, patient, committed family. It's important for Jermia to keep in touch with his brothers.

Might you consider adoption? Please talk with Kim Williams at Wayne County Dept. of Human Services, (313) 396-0239.

*A child is waiting appears Tuesdays in Features.*

# Gay equality push threatens to gut freedom of conscience

**W**e live in interesting times when the Catholic Church has to defend its doctrinal beliefs regarding the adoption of children against those who insist the church adjust its policies to reflect the preferences of gays and lesbians.

Such is the case in Massachusetts, where the Boston Archdiocese's Catholic Charities has been challenged by gay activists opposing the church's rule that adoptive children be placed only in heterosexual homes.

Massachusetts' gays have taken the position that the church, which has handled state adoptions for the past two decades, is discriminating against homosexuals and lesbians and is thus in violation of state anti-discrimination laws.

Unfortunately for all concerned, this apparent no-win situation has found a lose-lose resolution.

Catholic Charities, which for more than 100 years has placed 80 percent of the state's most challenging children — those who are mentally and physically handicapped — has decided to cease its adoption operations. Hard-to-place children henceforth will have to find homes some other way.

Meanwhile, gays, who could have adopted children from some 80 other gay-friendly adoption agencies in Massachusetts, have won a perhaps-dubious victory that has observers concerned about future church-state challenges.

If the church can be forced to adhere to state laws regarding adoption in spite of prohibitive doctrine, can the church also be forced in other areas, perhaps to conduct same-sex marriages? Gay activists have always insisted not, but the adoption case demonstrates that the lines separating church and state are not always so clear.

Personally, I know many gay and lesbian couples who would make far better parents than thousands of heterosexual couples out there who do not deserve the progeny they create.



**KATHLEEN PARKER**

But hypothetical, worst-case scenarios distort the real story, which isn't about either gays' qualifications to parent or gay rights.

One could more accurately charge that gay activists in this case have put their own political agenda before child welfare. After all, what public interest is being served in crushing Catholic Charities? Whom does it serve that Catholic Charities abandon its role as matriarch of adoption agencies in Massachusetts? Certainly not the children.

What this unhappy battle really is about — a battle in which all Americans have a stake — is freedom of conscience.

In an attempt to find some other remedy to the gay/Catholic Charities imbroglio, Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney on Thursday filed legislation — "An Act Protecting Religious Freedom" — that would allow religious institutions to continue to be licensed to provide adoption services without violating the tenets of their faith.

In an accompanying letter to state legislators, Romney wrote: "It is a matter beyond dispute... that a government not dictate to religious institutions the moral principles by which they are to carry out their charitable and divine mission."

If Romney is successful in getting his bill passed, gays can still adopt children in Massachusetts and Catholic Charities can do its good works. No one loses — except those advocates for whom individual "rights" are more important than either the cause of helping needy children or religious freedom.

*Kathleen Parker writes for the Orlando Sentinel.*

# City supports plan to aid homeless, but critics ask for more

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

By Kathy Jessup

[kjessup@kalamazoogazette.com](mailto:kjessup@kalamazoogazette.com) 388-8590

The Kalamazoo City Commission voted 4-1 Monday night to advance an affordable-housing, transportation and public-facilities initiative aimed at addressing what commissioners called downtown Kalamazoo's growing homeless population.

But members of the Kalamazoo Homeless Action Network, a local advocacy group, said the city's draft proposal will not satisfy their push for a local "human rights ordinance" that would prohibit discrimination against people based on "real or perceived economic status."

Failing commission action, advocates said, they would bring the measure to a citywide vote. City officials have said the group's proposal is unenforceable.

Commissioner Barbara Miller cast the lone dissenting vote Monday after nearly 90 minutes of public comment on the competing local proposals. Miller questioned whether the commission's proposal would compete with a 10-year Kalamazoo County initiative to end local homelessness.

"I have a problem with this whole philosophy in general," Miller said.

"Are we talking porta-potties in Bronson Park? The (Kalamazoo) Gospel Mission is already asking for donations. How will they come up with more money for another meal? I don't want to see Kalamazoo end up being a tent city."

The draft plan endorsed

Monday night calls for government, downtown Kalamazoo business interests, social-services providers and representatives from the homeless community to collaborate on a plan that steps up affordable-housing initiatives and provides short-term bus passes for work and medical care, the option of public restrooms and secure storage for the belongings of people who lack permanent housing.

Other topics under discussion will be panhandling and park-use ordinances, offering evening meals and "solutions to the need for overnight camping by those without permanent housing."

Brendan Sharpe, a 22-year-old unemployed man from Eau Claire who said he became homeless when his parents "dropped me off in Kalamazoo," told commissioners that Kalamazoo's homeless "aren't fighting for special rights, but basic human rights."

"A large percentage of us are decent human beings who have fallen on hard times," he said, claiming that people who have no permanent addresses are not considered for jobs. "Some of us count ourselves lucky for the services we have. We don't want much, just a little dignity and respect."

Some of the homeless people appearing at City Commission meetings over the last several months have claimed they are unfairly treated by private businesses and the Kalamazoo Public Library, where time limits may be set for table use or entry may be denied for offensive body odor. They also have been critical of the food served at shelters and rules such as curfews, chore requirements or having religious messages forced on them.

Some commissioners say they fear such criticisms may be undeserved and will hurt financial and volunteer support for shelters.

# New federal housing funds to aid homeless

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

By Chris Meehan

[cmeehan@kalamazoogazette.com](mailto:cmeehan@kalamazoogazette.com) 388-8412

At least two dozen disabled and homeless Kalamazoo County residents will get a more permanent roof over their heads as the result of federal funding expected to be announced today. U.S. Rep. Fred Upton, R-St. Joseph, and regional and local housing advocates were to detail today how more than \$860,000 released through the Department of Housing and Urban Development will be spent.

"This is utterly fantastic," said David Anderson, director of housing and facilities for Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. The agency scheduled a press conference for this afternoon at Rosewood, a mixed-income housing development in Kalamazoo. Anderson's agency is receiving more than \$550,000, about \$280,000 of which is a renewal of previous funding, to keep about 100 persons with disabilities in their apartments. The rest, he said, is new money that will help the agency find homes for at least another "couple of dozen" homeless people with disabilities.

Ellen Kisinger-Rothi, executive director of Housing Resources Inc., said her organization has gotten about \$310,000 to continue its program to provide 35 units of transitional housing for individuals and families who are homeless. This money will likely help about 60 individuals or families find temporary housing this year.

All of the funding, Kisinger-Rothi said, is part of an overall program in the county to provide a range of services to area homeless people. "As we have a growing problem of homelessness in this area, these funds are critical," she said.

# Husband jailed

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

The Grand Rapids Press

MANISTEE COUNTY -- A man who allegedly threatened to cut off his wife's finger to retrieve her wedding ring in an argument is jailed while prosecutors review potential charges against him, state police said. The 29-year-old Filer Township man and his 28-year-old wife fought Saturday over an ex-spouse and ex-boyfriend, prompting the alleged threat.

# Farmington Hills Man Missing

## *Man Suffers From Dementia*

POSTED: 5:01 pm EST March 20, 2006

A 70-year-old Farmington Hills man who suffers from dementia has wandered away from his home.

Farmington Hills police are asking for help in locating Cicero James Jones. He walked away from his home on March 19 at about 7 p.m. after being in an agitated state, according to the *Farmington Observer & Eccentric*.

Jones is described as a black man, 6-feet tall and weighing about 150 pounds. He has brown eyes, white hair, and was last seen wearing blue jeans, a t-shirt, a dark-colored leather jacket and eyeglasses, according to the paper's reports.

Jones does carry a Michigan ID and will provide his name if asked.

Police are concerned about the overnight temperatures and the well being of Jones.

If you have spotted Jones, call the Farmington Hills Police Department at (248) 871-2610.

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Kalamazoo Gazette Letters

March 21, 2006

## **Phone service made affordable**

Telephone access is important for all of Michigan's citizens. Recent changes in the Michigan Telecommunications Act make receiving phone service more affordable for Michigan's low-income families. The changes will allow more individuals to qualify for the Lifeline program that the companies I represent provide.

The Lifeline program allows qualifying residents to receive reduced monthly rates and a reduced installation charge to begin service with their local telephone company. On average, those who qualify save \$100 off their annual telephone bill, which does not include the additional savings on installation.

Under the new eligibility requirements, Michigan residents whose income is at or below 150 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines are eligible for Lifeline. Families are also eligible to apply if they participate in one of the following assistance programs -- Medicaid, food stamps, low-income home energy assistance program, temporary housing to needy families or the national school lunch program's free lunch program.

The members of the Telecommunications Association of Michigan support the Lifeline program. I urge you to contact your local phone company if you qualify and wish to subscribe to the Lifeline Assistance Program.

Scott Stevenson  
President  
Telecommunications  
Association of Michigan

# Private child welfare providers use creative approach

Date: Monday, March 20, 2006

Source: Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio - Fewer restrictions on federal child-welfare money are allowing private nonprofit agencies to use creative approaches to help troubled families.

Franklin County has been able to save money by transferring a quarter of its child welfare cases to two private agencies. The private agencies have fared somewhat better than the county at keeping children at home and finding more family and friends to provide foster care.

Ohio Youth Advocate Program, based in Hilliard, was able to keep together a Columbus family of 11, including a pregnant daughter, by moving them temporarily into a private home and pouring \$14,000 into repairs and cleanup of their unhealthy house. The kids might otherwise have landed in foster care.

Permanent Family Solutions, a part of Buckeye Ranch in Grove City, helped a 17-year-old mother-to-be find an apartment, pay rent and learn parenting skills to keep her from an abusive husband.

Such private approaches are praised by critics who view government child welfare programs as too quick to split up families and too slow to reunite them. They see private agencies as more flexible, creative and efficient.

Opponents call private providers less experienced in protecting children and worry that they charge too much.

"Experts disagree about the value of privatizing," said Tracey Feild, director of consulting with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a Baltimore-based advocacy group for disadvantaged children. "Too many of the experiments have been done too quickly, at too high a price without enough well-thought-out planning."

Kansas saw early problems when it privatized with caseworker turnover and diminished services to families, for example. Michigan had better luck, however. The child-to-caseworker ratio dropped a third, to 21-to-1, after private agencies got control.

The Franklin County program was possible because of revisions in federal funding guidelines to allow lump sum payments to private providers to take a certain number of cases from start to finish. The county's seven-year experiment with such "managed care" has saved taxpayers nearly \$16 million, even as its payments to the nonprofits rise.

Ohio Youth Advocate will receive \$33,139 per case this year, and Permanent Family Solutions will get \$35,500 per case. Meanwhile, Children Services expects to spend an average of \$36,000 per case.

"They're doing really well for such a new program," said Madeleine Kimmich, senior project director for Human Services Research Institute, which the state hired to evaluate programs in Franklin and several other counties.

# Republicans, Democrats disagree on effect of minimum wage drive

3/20/2006, 5:55 p.m. ET

By DAVID EGGERT  
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Exactly how much more money workers will get under a minimum wage increase could be a question headed for the courts.

One set of increases that begins taking effect in October already has passed the Legislature and is headed to Gov. Jennifer Granholm, who's expected to sign it.

A competing proposal that would tie future minimum wage increases to the inflation rate, raise wages for employees who make tips and first hike the minimum wage in January could be on the November ballot.

Republicans and Democrats disagree over which measure would trump the other.

The bill on Granholm's desk raises the \$5.15 hourly minimum wage to \$6.95 in October, \$7.15 in July 2007 and \$7.40 in July 2008. It also contains language saying that the proposed constitutional amendment, if passed by voters, overrides any wage hikes written in the legislation.

Republicans say that means the ballot measure, if approved by voters, would drop the minimum wage to \$6.85 in January — 10 cents lower than the raise passed by the GOP-controlled Legislature.

"He who plays the last trump card wins," said Ari Adler, spokesman for Republican Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema of Wyoming. "If you vote for the ballot initiative in November, you are voting to lower the minimum wage in Michigan."

Democrats and unions, however, argue their ballot measure sets a floor, not a ceiling. They note that it includes wording that says the state can establish wages exceeding rates proposed in the petition.

It also says the measure cannot "diminish" any statutory rights of employees, which state Democratic Party Chairman Mark Brewer said includes the \$1.80 an hour increase workers are set to get in October.

"People get the higher wage," he said. "This (ballot measure) is a floor. The Legislature can always go above it."

When the minimum wage hits \$7.40 in 2008, annual inflationary increases in the constitutional amendment can kick in, Brewer said.

But Adler responded that if the ballot proposal is approved, it is as if the wage hikes in the legislation never existed, because the bill specifically mentions the constitutional amendment. "This bill says these are your minimum wage rates unless you approve the ballot proposal," he said.

Democrats and labor unions are still considering going forward with the petition drive because the measure would lock wage increases into the state constitution and, they hope, boost Democratic turnout this fall.

Brewer said leaders in the Michigan Needs a Raise Coalition, which is pushing the ballot proposal, have told him the petition drive will continue as planned. He predicted the issue will be on the November ballot.

But Ken Fletcher, legislative director of the Michigan AFL-CIO, a member of the coalition, said no final decision has been made on whether to continue. The coalition likely will make a decision within a week, he said.

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The minimum wage bill is Senate Bill 318.

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On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Michigan Needs a Raise: <http://www.mineedsaraise.org>

Michigan AFL-CIO: <http://www.miaflcio.org>

Michigan Democratic Party: <http://www.michigandems.com>

Michigan Republican Party: <http://www.migop.org>

# Keeping the poor down

Monday, March 20, 2006

Editor, The News:

This is in response to Matthew Davey's letter March 10 on the topic of stopping the minimum wage increase in Michigan.

Davey did not say, but I'm betting he does not earn minimum wage or even close to it. He does not need to worry about whether he should use his pay for food, heat or rent. Unfortunately, there are others who do.

Davey must live in a vacuum because from what I've seen we already have inflation. When the minimum wage was set at \$5.15 an hour, gasoline prices were hovering around \$1.10. That is 21 percent of a person's hourly wage for a gallon of gas. Today, the prices are around \$2.45, which is 48 percent of a person's hourly wage. And while gasoline prices go up, everything connected to gas prices also goes up: groceries, heating bills, entertainment and services such as cable and phone.

My solution is a lot easier. Quit paying millions of dollars to all those chief executives of corporations such as McDonald's, Burger King and other business entities that traditionally pay their line workers minimum or just above minimum.

Those executives are not even worth \$35,000 a year.

But I guess it is easier to go after the single mother trying to make ends meet, instead of the corporate CEOs making millions who donate thousands of dollars to elected officials to try and keep the working poor just that -- poor.

Raymond Feyedelem  
Saginaw

# Report: Minority children more likely to be in state supervision

3/21/2006, 1:10 p.m. ET

By KATHY BARKS HOFFMAN  
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Too many minority children are ending up in foster care, and they fare worse than other children once they are under state supervision, even though they are no more abused or neglected than other children, a new report says.

"For too many African-American children, there is a 'slippery slope' leading from children's protective services to juvenile detention — even prison," says a report from the Michigan Advisory Committee on the Overrepresentation of Children of Color in Welfare.

The state Department of Human Services released the report Tuesday. The Legislature last year required the department to set up a task force to study why a disproportionate number of minority children end up in the child abuse and neglect and juvenile justice systems in Michigan.

"African-American and Native American children are more likely to be under state supervision and, once there, they generally fare worse than other children," the report says. "Even though there is no evidence that they are abused or neglected more than other children, children of color are more likely to be pulled into Michigan's child protection system, and to be placed in out-of-home care."

Once there, they are less likely to be reunited with their parents and usually spend more time in foster care than white children, the report noted.

Although black children represent about 18 percent of all children in the state, they represent more than half the children living in foster care or other out-of-home care. About 20,000 children are in foster care at any one time in Michigan.

The task force was co-chaired by Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow and Carol Goss, chief executive and president of the Detroit-based Skillman Foundation.

"It's not only the state's responsibility, it's all of ours," Goss said of the effort to end the disparity between white and minority children.

Among its recommendations, the report says that the Department of Human Services should review the effect of its policies and procedures on minority families and children.

"Because African-American parents are no more likely than others to mistreat their children, and poverty rates are not enough to explain disparities, it follows that somewhere in the child welfare decision-making process families of color are treated differently, resulting in their overrepresentation," the report says.

It also recommends monitoring the state's progress in reducing overrepresentation, expanding the number of caseworkers to address families' basic needs and prevent unnecessary out-of-home placements, and focus resources on the most vulnerable families, such as teen parents, relative caregivers and parents with physical, mental health or substance abuse problems.

The Skillman Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation provided the funds for the advisory committee.

On the Net:

Michigan Department of Human Services: <http://www.michigan.gov/dhs>

# Black families more likely to be broken by foster care, legal systems

Tuesday, March 21, 2006

By Ted Roelofs  
The Grand Rapids Press

For reasons she does not comprehend, Tamiqwa Wright was taken from her home last fall and put into foster care.

Now, she and her two sisters are split between two foster homes. Her two younger brothers are with relatives in Missouri.

"I just want to go home," said Wright, 13, waiting for her weekly one-hour visit with her mother, Grand Rapids resident Spring Wright. "My mother was a good mom, a great mom. I miss her so much."

It is a cry of anguish heard far more often in black homes than in white ones, according to a report released today to the state Legislature. The report also found black youths are far more likely than whites to be arrested, sent to juvenile court or locked up.

Advocates for children say it is a disparity ignored far too long.

"Too many children of color are being pulled into the system," said Pat Sorenson, vice president for policy for Michigan's Children, a statewide child advocacy organization.

Sorenson said higher poverty rates among minority families might explain part of the difference.

"But poverty alone doesn't account for all of the difference. There is no evidence of greater abuse among African-American families," Sorenson said. "There are many discrepancies along the way, and we need to look at what is causing those discrepancies."

In Kent County, black children are nearly 3 1/2 times more likely than whites to be put into foster care, according to the report. In counties with more than 150 children in foster care, this disparity ranged from 1.69 in Wayne County to 8.03 in Oakland County. In Ottawa County, the rate was 6.89 -- the second-highest in Michigan.

The report also found a "slippery slope" for children leading from Children's Protective Services to the juvenile justice system.

Within that system, black youths were 88 percent more likely to be arrested, 97 percent less likely to be placed in a diversion program and 4.2 times more likely to be put in jail or prison.

One Kent County critic contends the foster care network systematically discriminates against minority families.

"We as minorities, we are the first ones they grab, and the last ones they let go," said Walter Durham of Families United for Justice and Equality. Formed two years ago, the group is pressing for reform of the foster care system and its treatment of minorities.

Durham contends CPS workers often are overzealous in their pursuit of complaints of abuse and neglect. In some cases, he contends, black children are removed from homes for borderline reasons.

"The CPS workers, they have their God complex. It's like, 'We have the answers, you don't.' They get stubborn."



Sevator Selden-Johnson, district manager for Kent County's Department of Human Services, agrees there's room for improvement.

"There's got to be a better way to do what we do," she said.

"It's a multifaceted problem. We have to look at every function in our system. Why are we terminating rights from so many minority families?"

The report, co-chaired by Michigan Department of Human Services Director Marianne Udow, offers several recommendations. They include focusing resources on the most vulnerable families, maximizing "culturally proficient" and community-based services and establishing a committee to monitor progress.

In the case of Spring Wright, her children were taken from her care after she left her daughter, Kiana Hughes, 11, in the care of a relative. Her daughter suffers from sickle cell anemia and failed to take her medication, Wright said.

Wright is working to get back her parental rights. Her home life also was disrupted by the death in July 2004 of the father of three of her children, Derrick Hughes.

Grand Rapids police found his body in a van on the city's Southeast Side, a death that resulted from a cocaine overdose, according to toxicology results.

"There was never an abuse proven. My house is always clean. I always have food," Wright said.



JENNIFER M. GRANHOLM  
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN  
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES  
LANSING



MARIANNE UDOW  
DIRECTOR

## News Release

Contact: Stepheni Schlinker or Maureen Sorbet (517) 373-7394

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### Panel releases report on ways to achieve racial equity in child welfare

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March 21, 2006

LANSING - A state task force on the overrepresentation of children of color in child welfare, co-chaired by Department of Human Services director Marianne Udow and Detroit-based Skillman Foundation CEO Carol Goss, released its report today at a news conference in Lansing. The recommendations in the report, *Equity: Moving Toward Better Outcomes for All of Michigan's Children*, are intended to provide better outcomes for children of color served by the state's child welfare system.

In every state, African American and Native American children have historically made up a disproportionate percentage of the child welfare population when compared to their percentage of the general population. Michigan is taking a comprehensive approach to addressing this national concern.

"The time is right for changes that will improve outcomes for children and families of color," said DHS director Marianne Udow. "The recommendations in the *Equity* report include initiatives we have already begun as well as new strategies that will make a lasting difference for children in Michigan."

Robert Hill, an author, national expert and researcher on child welfare disparities that consulted on the project, said Michigan's effort is unique among states.

"Michigan and its outstanding advisory committee should be strongly commended for its pioneering strides," he said. "This effort will serve as a model to spur similar initiatives to combat minority overrepresentation by states across the nation."

The report makes 11 recommendations to the Governor and state Legislature for action by the department, the Legislature, private agency providers and community partners including:

1. Identify and target funding to ensure that services are available to help keep children *safely* with their birth families.
2. Maximize federal Title IV-E (foster care) administrative funding.
3. Pursue a federal waiver to allow more flexibility in the use of Title IV-E funds.
4. Review the impact of all DHS child welfare policies, programs, and procedures on families and children of color.
5. Ensure culturally proficient practices.
6. Engage families as partners at each critical decision point in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

- more -

7. Appropriate resources to address families' basic needs.
8. Focus resources on the most vulnerable families.
9. Build community support for reducing overrepresentation.
10. Monitor the state's progress in reducing overrepresentation.
11. Ensure local accountability.

"We must continue to work together as a statewide community to address these issues," said Carol Goss, Skillman Foundation CEO. "The stakes are high for children of color and their families, and we must strengthen the safety net of community services that fit their real needs."

The Department of Human Services (DHS) is addressing many of these child welfare issues through a number of program improvements and initiatives already under way:

- DHS has already adopted a new approach to child welfare that focuses on involving family in decision-making, keeping children with birth families whenever *safely* possible, and when out of home placement is necessary to assure the safety of the child, increasing the number of placements with relatives. This new approach – Family to Family – is already in place in 38 counties and will be implemented in another 28 counties by year's end.
- The department is pursuing a federal waiver that would allow the use of Title IV-E funds to expand innovative prevention and family support programs.
- The department is already working with funding sources to determine where flexibility exists to support community-based initiatives.
- To support the placement of children with relatives, DHS is encouraging relative caregivers to become licensed foster parents.

These initiatives are already showing results statewide. The overall foster care caseload dropped by two percent since 2004, and the percentage of out-of-home placements with relatives has increased by over 10 percent since 2003.

The Michigan Department of Human Services administers the state's Children's Protective Services and Foster Care programs providing placement and supervision of children who are the responsibility of the DHS under the jurisdiction of the Family Court, or whose parents have voluntarily released their parental rights. The goal of foster care is to give children a home and a family to care for them until they are either reunited with birth parents or adopted.

■ **View the report online or download it from [www.michigan.gov/dhs](http://www.michigan.gov/dhs)**